

Heidelberg Center for American Studies

Spring Academy Report

March 18–22, 2019



We rang in the 16th annual HCA Spring Academy with bright sun and a cup of coffee at the HCA's Atrium on Monday, March 18, 2019. Once again, we were proud to welcome twenty Ph.D. students, affiliated with institutions in eight countries and originating from Burkina Faso, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. HCA Director Welf Werner and Executive Director Wilfried Mausbach, one of the main facilitators of the conference, spoke warm words of welcome, introducing the HCA to our participants.

Following a brief reception that offered everyone a chance to mingle, Ms. Spring Academy, Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, and Dr. Mausbach led the way to the conference venue in order to start off the week with the Warm-Up Session. Subsequently, the (in)famous cowbell announced the start of "academic speed dating," an exercise with a long tradition at the Spring Academy, in which the participants explain their Ph.D. projects to each other at blazingly fast speed. This was followed by an extended discussion of "What is/are American Studies?" where the group tried to connect different key words as umbrella terms for all the projects presented throughout the week. Suggestions included "diversity," "movement," "transnationality," and "materiality/material culture," among others.

The first panel, titled "A picture is worth a thousand words?" was chaired by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and focused on two completely different but nonetheless compelling aspects of photography. Stella Jungmann from Zurich University in Switzerland introduced us to her project on the American representation of Japan through photography in the late 19th century: "'Are they not picturesque!': Robert H. Pruyn's photographs of Edo, Japan, 1862." Stella analyzes the photography and letter correspondence of diplomatic minister Pruyn in Edo (present-day Tokyo) from 1862 – 1865 in order to reconstruct his time in Japan. In focusing on microhistory and "visual communities," Stella hopes to explore how Americans visualized "the Other" and "the exotic" in a time when the whole nation was looking "inwards" (Civil War).

The second speaker of the panel was Emily Brady, who came to us from the University of Nottingham, UK, to present her project on "'I Made Them Look Good': African American Women Photographers and The Role of the Politics of Respectability in the Long Civil Rights Movement." Emily works with Evelyn B. Higginbotham's definition of "politics of respectability" to argue that black female photographers were only seen eligible to do this profession within the "feminine sphere," which meant that children, women, or scenes of missionary work in Africa and Asia were common photo motives. Emily further traces black female photography in different genres, such as war photography, photojournalism, and activist photography.

Jesse Kraft from the University of Delaware, USA, opened the second panel on "Material Culture," chaired by HCA Director Welf Werner, with his talk about "'Sustained by Foreign Coin': American Methods to Navigate a Complex Monetary System, 1750–1915." Jesse traces the usage of foreign coins (mostly Spanish-American coins and English shilling) in the early British colonies and later the United States, which accounted for a complex monetary system and mathematical formulas until one coinage was introduced for all states in 1857. Jesse argues that the use of foreign coins made sense

as merchants consumers already knew them. However, with the influx of many unfamiliar foreign coins, the introduction of an American monetary system was inevitable.

Eva Rüska, the panel's second speaker, from Freiburg University, Germany, presented her project on "'Doing Sustainability'" – Performing Rural Development in Appalachia." In her interdisciplinary research, Eva is interested in governance, sustainability, and culture alike. She uses the singer Dolly Parton as an exemplar of her thesis, as Dolly, herself raised in rural Appalachia, puts forward change in sustainability theories. With her case study of Appalachia, Eva points out that decreasing resources is something the Appalachian people have had to deal with throughout their lives and since the industrial sector has been dying in the area for decades, Appalachian states have already taken on sustainability projects to, for example, create alternative jobs.

The second day of the conference continued with our third panel on "American Cultural Exceptionalism in Music and Comics," chaired by Dr. Rashida K. Braggs from Williams College, USA, our Spring Academy visiting scholar. In 2009–2010, Rashida had already spent an academic year at the HCA and we were very happy to welcome her back again.

Manuel Bocquier from Poles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France, was the first to present his project on Tuesday. In his talk on "Categorizing and Negotiating Identities through Music: 'race music,' 'old time music,' and their Public (1920–1940)," Manuel introduced us to Old-Time Music, produced and consumed mostly in Southern Appalachia in the 1930's. In his analysis, Manuel will have a close look at the audience of the genre in order to understand the construction of what he calls the "musical color line."

Our second Tuesday speaker, Aanchal Vij from the University of Sussex, UK, spoke about a part of her Ph.D. project, entitled "'I was the prosthesis': Reading Counterfactual, Reparative, and Prosthetic Histories in *The Plot against America* and *Watchmen*." In her dissertation, Aanchal looks at nostalgia and the portrayal of American exceptionalism in the medium of comic books. She points out that 'hyperamerican' characters are a part of American history since overcompensation for what one perceives as a defect is particularly common among readers. She therefore looks at the disabilities of certain characters and tries to find similarities between them and their creators, and Americans as a whole.

After a short coffee break, Mr. Spring Academy Wilfried Mausbach chaired panel 4 on "Exploring the Global South Internationally: West Africa - Arab Spring." Harrouna Malgouri, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, USA, spoke about "Francophone Group Resistance in Colonial French West Africa and the Universal Negro Improvement Association." Harrouna argues that U.S. foreign policy makers scrutinized Pan-African activism in Francophone West Africa between 1946 and 1987, as these activists often challenged U.S. hegemony. As for his sources, Harrouna, himself a native of Burkina Faso, focuses on interviewing African women and makes use of his bilingualism in Francophone and colonial archives in West-African countries.

Our second speaker on the panel was Marwa Wasfy who came to us from the University of Kent and introduced us to her Ph.D. project on "NATO Heading South: Re-examination of The Transatlantic Security Community after the Arab Spring." In a very personal account, Marwa gave us an overview of her experiences of the Arab Spring in Egypt, her country of origin, She highlights the roles of social media as well as women. Marwa's main question is how the transatlantic community has

responded to the Arab Spring and what the measures taken can tell us about the future of the region and NATO.

Tuesday's last panel "That's a no-no: Tracing Cultural Appropriation and Mental Illness in 20th Century Literature" was chaired by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. The first speaker, Richard Elliott from the University of Edinburgh, UK, introduced us to a chapter of his thesis on "Philip Roth and Race in *The Human Stain*." In his thesis, Richard crosses cultural boundaries in American fiction from the 1960's to the present and he is trying to contribute to the limits of liberal individualism. As an example for this, he introduced us to the main character in Roth's novel *The Human Stain*, who tries to pass as a white Jew in order to escape from "his father's story of a black man." Richard's analysis of the protagonist evolves around the question of how free we are to write our own life story.

Turning to a different aspect of cultural appropriation, Abigail Mokra from Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic, spoke to us about "Crises of the Postmodern Literary Mind: Can Symptomatic Traits of Mental Illness Exemplify Mimetic Intertextuality?" Abigail focusses on the works of J.D. Salinger and poses the questions of why manifestations of mental illness occur in his literature at a certain point in the chapter she presented. She argues that Salinger's experiences of the war and his own mental illness after returning from the front are all written into his characters as an homage to himself. Based on comprehensive methodology, she also examines the influence of Salinger's works on later authors as well as the (mimetic) intertextuality among the examined texts.

As the day came to an end, the HCA invited the group to a city tour around Heidelberg's beautiful Old Town with local guide Kristian Willenbacher and the evening ended with a traditional German meal at a local brewery.

Wednesday resumed with panel 6 on "Community Responses: Race and Class", chaired by Ulrike Gerhard, professor of human geography at Heidelberg University. ToniAnn Trevino from the University of Michigan, USA, presented "The Border and the City: Federal and Local Anti-Narcotics Projects in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1965–1972." ToniAnn studies the drug legislation in Texas of the 1950's, which are heavily influenced by Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans. In case studies of individuals and communities, she hopes to discover absent narratives, for example in highlighting the role of religious and recovery centers in San Antonio.

Our second speaker, Monica Campbell from the University of Mississippi, USA, introduced us to "Deliver Us From Urban Decay: The Central Little Rock Project and the Making of the Neoliberal City." Based on her analysis of urban renewal politics in Little Rock, Arkansas, Monica argues that gentrification has altered the city decades before it became a nationwide phenomenon. In a response to the city's urban crisis in the 1950's, projects were founded privately to renew the city's housing and business plans. Monica argues that Little Rock's "project" can be seen as a model that has later served as a national prototype.

Following panel 6, the Spring Academy participants were escorted to Mannheim to John Deere Germany. As sponsor of the Spring Academy, John Deere not only supports the program financially but also invites the participants to learn about their striving American-German manufacturing partnership. After a light reception and an introduction by Public Relations and Brand Management Manager, Dr. Ralf Lenge, the group got to ask anything that came to mind in this unfamiliar setting, which led to a lively discussion and interesting facts.

Back at the HCA, Wednesday concluded with a workshop on "Academic Writing and Publishing," led by Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Dr. Sherry Föhr. Participants were given tips and motivational instructions on how to write their theses by Sherry Föhr who facilitates the Writing Resources Center in Heidelberg University's English Department and is known as a "true genius" to many Spring Academy cohorts. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung shared her expertise in the publishing world as a co-editor of a scholarly journal. The workshop proved effective and instructive to participants.

Thursday started with another panel chaired by Ms. Spring Academy, entitled "'Embodying the Human and the Transhuman.'" Carmen Laguarda Bueno from the University of Zaragoza, Spain, introduced us to "Fictionalizing the Debate over Human Enhancement Technologies: Richard Powers's *Generosity: An Enhancement* (2009), Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) and Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016)." In her project, she looks at the concepts of Transhumanism and Posthumanism and analyzes the three novels mentioned above in the context of these concepts. Through Carmen's focus on narratology, the group gave interesting feedback on further literature or links to other Academic fields, for example, how religious studies get involved with the topic of Enhancement Technologies.

Our second speaker for panel 7 was Irene Polimante, University of Macerata, Italy, who spoke to us about "From Page to Stage: The Physical Experience of Voicing Words." Irene argues that through performance, poetry can be experienced in a plurality of senses, as the performance can happen on and off page. Composition and performance of the poem can be portrayed as a form of art, and the audience is not merely a spectator, but to take on a role as co-performer.

Panel 8 changed our perspective to a very different academic field: "Populism: Framing and the Provision of Public Goods." Maren Schäfer, Heidelberg University, Germany, gave us an overview of "Stylistic Characteristics of Contemporary Populist Rhetoric". Maren centered her presentation on populist communication methods and argued that populists use, among others, the following strategies to address the public: defining in- and out-groups, making moral claims as well as using persuasion and an alleged outsider perspective.

Guido Rohmann from Free University of Berlin continued the session with his talk on "Geographies of Discontent" and anti-establishment voting in Western democracies, introducing us to his case studies of the U.S., Great Britain, and Germany in his presentation. In a first hypothesis, Guido argues that voters who benefit from government-supplied good are less likely to vote for anti-establishment parties, which he grounds in complex studies and analyses of different Western countries.

After lunch, we resumed with panel 9, chaired by Jan Stievermann, professor of the History of Christianity in the U.S., which we entitled "Believers, Doubters, and Unbelievers: From Religious Communities to the Rise of Secularism." Caitlin Smith Oyekole from the University of Notre Dame, USA, introduced us to her project on "Transcendentalist Darkness: Doubt, Skepticism, Infidelity, Grief." In her dissertation, Caitlin looks at literature produced between 1734 and 1876 to analyze the representation of religious doubt. In her talk, Caitlin focuses on Ralph Waldo Emerson and other thinkers of the 1830's philosophical movement of transcendentalism, and his conception of doubt, skepticism, and pyrrhonism.

Thursday's last speaker was Sarah Buchmeier, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA, who talked about "The Secularist Re-formation: How Secularism Changed the Shape of American Literature." Sarah introduced us to the theory of post-secularism and argues that the co-emergence of epistemology and

secularism were equally influenced by the tension between realism and romanticism in the late 19th century. Sarah uses the example of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and her 1868 novel *The Gates Ajar*, where Phelps creates an orthodox heaven disconnected from any life on earth, arguing for a more secular version of belief.

After the sessions concluded, the participants had the chance to partake in a one-on-one consultation with Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Sherry Föhr to speak about individual issues concerning writing and publishing.

The last day of the conference started off with a workshop on “Jazz Research through Embodied Performance,” facilitated by our visiting scholar Dr. Rashida K. Braggs. Rashida introduced us to her research on Jazz diasporas, the history of Jazz performance, and music and performance historiography. Afterwards, the whole group was invited to participate in a performance exercise: In groups of four to five people, our participants should express their thoughts about “diaspora” in either sound or movement performances. While it certainly took a lot of courage for some to step out of their comfort zone, all groups came up with very diverse, innovative and cleverly thought out performances– a profound experience.

After lunch, the tenth and last panel on “Revising Humanism: From Modernist Anthropocentrism to Contemporary Posthumanism” was chaired by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. Sebastian Williams from Purdue University, USA, spoke about “Parasites and Public Health: Nonhuman Actors in Great Depression Literature.” In the works he analyzed, Sebastian discovered the role of “parasitism,” which he divides into “social parasites” (sharecroppers, migrants, etc.) and parasitic organisms (lice, fleas, hookworms, etc.). The latter, he argues, play a significant role in Great Depression literature as authors use parasites as complex stylistic devices.

Our last speaker of this year’s Spring Academy was Fabian Eggers from Free University Berlin. Fabian presented his topic on “The Aesthetics of Intimacy in Contemporary American Literature,” and starts off by pointing out that we are currently in an era of “new sincerity” and literature, in particular, is used as a means to achieve intimacy. However, he goes one step further and suggests that the shift of intimacy in modern literature has certain similarities with the shift of intimacy in modern day communities. Therefore, he examines cultural expressions of intimacy and looks at correlations in works of fiction and non-fiction.

To conclude the conference, Friday’s “Cool Down” Session referred back to the collected key terms from the beginning of the week. In a brief feedback round, the participants thanked the team and facilitators for the interesting and enlightening week. After Ms. and Mr. Spring Academy fulfilled their last “duty” for this year by handing out the certificates, the HCA invited the participants to a farewell dinner at a prestigious German restaurant to celebrate another successful HCA Spring Academy.

Franziska Pentz (with great support by Sarah Joeris and Yasmin Leonhardt)